Who drives a crisis? The diffusion of an issue through social networks

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Digital convergence has permeated the media environment. Social network services such as Twitter and blogs have dramatically changed how people collect and process information. The purpose of this study is to use content analysis to investigate the inter-media agenda-setting relationship among different media regarding a crisis. The findings support the inter-media agenda-setting effects in various dimensions, with Twitter being the leading outlet of crisis-related reports in terms of volume and content.

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1. Introduction

The global flow of information has changed dramatically due to the emergence of social media. Traditional newspaper readership has dropped more than 50%, whereas the number of new communication channels, such as social networking services, has greatly increased. In fact, social media has become part of everyday life (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), encompassing over 1 billion Facebook users (Associate Press, 2013) and more than 115 million active Twitter users (Statistic Brain, 2013). In Korea, one of the most digitized countries, newspaper readership has fallen from 69% to 29% (Korea Press Foundation, 2012), with 70% of the population using smart phones, and 10 million people using Twitter.

News media play an important role in shaping public perception and opinion (Lippmann, 1922; Lerbinger, 2011), as they set the public agenda by highlighting certain issues and increasing their salience (McCombs, 2004). Furthermore, the agendas of certain types of media often influence those of other media, as the importance placed on particular issues transfers from one medium to another (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). It was determined that major forms of traditional media, such as newspaper and television, set the agenda of other media. However, non-major media outlets also often possess considerable leadership and influence the agenda of elite media (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). The agenda-setting paradigm has transformed as a result of the changing media landscape; the Internet is now considered an alternative news medium and is receiving increasing attention among media scholars (Song, 2007). However, there is scant research that empirically examines the role of new communication technology in the transformation of the agenda-setting process.

Dramatic changes in the media environment have also influenced crisis communication. According to a study conducted by the public relations firm Burson-Marsteller (2011), 79% of executives expected that their companies would experience a crisis within 12 months and 50% assumed this would occur in digital space. However, approximately half of the respondents did not feel confident handling new media during a crisis. Therefore, it is critical to determine how new media influence the outbreak and spread of a crisis, as well as the roles of various types of media in the agenda-setting process with a particular focus on new media. It is also necessary to analyze communication among media sources as a crisis evolves and the ways in which such sources influence each another. Although there is an increasing amount of research focused on the importance of social media in crisis communication, few studies have yet to address the role of the media, particularly social media, in the emergence and development of corporate crises (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). As communication technologies continue to evolve, crisis communicators must ascertain how public opinion is shaped and developed both online and offline.

The purpose of this study is to explore the inter-media agenda-setting relationship between various types of media by analyzing the influence of sources on respective media agendas. To accomplish this, the study examines and compares the agenda of traditional media alongside that of online media, particularly social media. Social media have emerged as alternative sources of information and their significance is increasingly emphasized; however, very limited research has been conducted with regard to their significance in the context of crisis communication.

In order to address these issues, the current study examined the coverage of a recent crisis by both traditional and new media. The crisis entailed a restaurant franchise whose pregnant patron posted claims on the Internet that she was assaulted by an

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employee. The company's reputation was damaged as this story spread through social networks, and the crisis ignited as the online community fixated on the issue. Several days later, the story received coverage from numerous major media outlets. This case suits the purpose of this study in that from beginning to end, social networks played a central role in spreading negative news. The crisis began through an individual's tweet and blog posting, but was quickly picked up by other social media users. Twitter was the primary medium through which the issue spread.

This study will present significant preliminary findings through the analysis of a particular crisis that was: (1) initially posted online and disseminated through social media and (2) prominently covered through online and offline news media a few days later. A comprehensive content analysis was conducted throughout each phase of the crisis on a variety of media including offline newspapers, online newspapers, broadcast networks, blogs, Twitter, online communities and online portals. This research would extend the theoretical horizon of agenda-setting, as well as crisis management, by studying how various media operate in the changed media landscape.

2. Conceptualization

2.1. Crisis management and media

Organizations today face an increasing number of crises. In order to prevent, prepare for and respond to such crises, organizations attempt to enhance their crisis management capacity. A crisis results in a variety of negative consequences for an organization, such as financial loss and reputation damage (Coombs, 2012). It is widely accepted that crises have a life cycle with distinct stages (Fearn-Banks, 2011; Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1994). Since different actions are required during different phases, an understanding of this life cycle helps to ensure better crisis management and response. Fink's (1986) four-stage model provides a useful frame for examining the comprehensive landscape of a crisis, from pre-crisis to post-crisis: (1) prodromal; (2) crisis breakout or acute; (3) chronic; and (4) resolution. At the prodromal stage, a potential crisis begins to emerge and the crisis manager is asked to detect signals and prevent it. Otherwise, a crisis breaks out (acute stage) and a triggering event occurs, along with damage. Damages or impacts differ depending on the response of the organization. At the chronic stage, the effect of the crisis lingers if it is not contained properly. Finally, at the resolution stage, the crisis is no longer a concern to stakeholders.

A crisis is an attractive news item and draws considerable media attention (Lerbinger, 2011). Traditionally, news media have been regarded as one of the critical components of crisis communication, as most stakeholders gather information regarding a crisis through various media, and media portrayal of a crisis shapes public perception and interpretation of the situation (Fearn-Banks, 2011; Lerbinger, 2011; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Media may also drive the development of an issue from the emerging stage to the public involvement stage (Lerbinger, 2011). Hence, when an organization faces a crisis, it is imperative to monitor and scan media coverage (Heath, 1997) and evaluate the media frame (Holladay, 2009). Understanding, and possibly managing, the flow of information in the event of a crisis is pivotal to successful crisis management.

New media and communication technology have also influenced crisis communication. Members of the public are no longer passive recipients of information from traditional news media; through the Internet and new media, they have become active communicators who seek out and generate information, and subsequently instigate and increase pressure on organizations (Coombs, 2012; Stephens & Malone, 2009). Organizations'

stakeholders have become more active on the Internet, and various media outlets provide them with a variety of ways to express their concerns and create content through web pages, discussion boards, blogs, micro-blogs and social networks (Coombs, 2002; Lerbinger, 2006). The growth of social media usage has led to a rise in 'citizen journalists,' as public-generated information is circulated beyond the scope of traditional news media (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011).[1] Wigley and Fontenot (2010, 2011) found that the amount of citizen-generated content referenced in traditional news reports increased from 6.5% (with regard to the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting) to 9.5% (with regard to the 2011 Tuscan shooting). During a crisis, news media are increasingly likely to draw information from social media, due to the instantaneous nature of its dissemination, rather than organizational spokespersons. According to Schultz et al. (2011), people are more likely to share news from online newspapers than social media such as Twitter because they perceive traditional sources such as newspapers as more credible. Due to such changes in both the media environment and public behavior, there is a need for different strategies and tactics in crisis communication.

2.2. Agenda-setting and inter-media agenda-setting

News media set the social agenda by creating consensus across various sections of society (Lerbinger, 2011). *Agenda-setting* refers to the strong causal influence of media on the public or the transfer of salience from media agenda to public agenda (McCombs, 2004). According to this theory, those topics highlighted by the news media subsequently receive public attention and increase public awareness; that is, the media suggest to the public topics to consider.

News is not a simple collection of objective facts; it not only instructs its audience as to "what to think about," but also suggests "how to think about it" and "what to think" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 65). In agenda-setting research, the concept of 'framing' has received substantial attention as a means of understanding the effect of the media on the public agenda. Framing, or second level agenda-setting, is "the selection of and emphasis upon particular attributes for the media agenda when talking about an object" (McCombs, 2004, p. 87) and deals with how selected attributes of objects or issues in the media agenda transfer to those in the public agenda. As Cappella and Jamieson (1997) pointed out, framing "focuses the viewer's attention on its subjects in specific ways" (p. 38) by determining what is salient and what is not. There are two types of attributes: *cognitive attributes*, which comprise the factual or conceptual aspect of an issue, and *affective attributes*, or the tone of the report and the criteria with which the media evaluate the issue (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). Research has shown that the media, through framing, may have significant influence on the public's opinions, attitudes and perceptions. During an election, for example, news reports on a specific characteristic of a candidate increase its salience among the public (Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004).

Scholars extended the original model linking public and media agenda by examining the forces that shape the media agenda (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). News sources are one of the most examined factors since news stories typically refer to individuals related to the story including politicians (Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, & McCombs, 1989), public officials (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002), scientists, experts (Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991) and organization spokespersons (Pavlik, 1987). Several studies on the relationship between source-media agenda-setting found that sources such as press releases (Kaid, 1976), advertising (Sweetser

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[1] According to Statistic Brain (2013), it takes 5 days to reach 1 billion tweets for any particular topic.